

The Perfect Copy Editor



By Anne Glover

To be a copy editor is to tackle one of the toughest - and sometimes most thankless - jobs in the newsroom. To get hired or to move ahead in the business is even tougher - in many newsrooms, it's "sink or swim" for the copy editor, with very little help or advice along the way. Here, veteran copy editor, desk supervisor and newsroom manager Anne Glover offers some inside tips on how to get a good copy desk job. They apply not only at her paper but at all good newspapers.

1. Passion for the work.

We have a motto at the St. Petersburg Times: We hire journalists. Whatever you want to call yourself beyond that - copy editor, designer, visual journalist, reporter - is fine. But our experience has been that if you have the journalism part down, your success is virtually guaranteed.

If you work for a newspaper, you must care about news. You must be conversant in what the news of the day is. Are you following the major stories locally and nationally? Can you talk to me about what the lead story in your hometown paper was that morning? What are some of the issues that your newspaper finds important enough to devote considerable ink and reporters' time to? In what ways do you think your newspaper serves your readers? What's your policy on naming rape victims? Do you agree or disagree?

I'll ask you those questions and more. And then the executive editor will ask you even more detailed questions. We are trying to determine if you share our commitment to journalism. It's not enough to work at a newspaper. You must immerse yourself in it. Because we expect you to immerse yourself in ours.

2. A solid education in the basics.

By basics, I mean copy editing, reporting, grammar, style, spelling, headline writing, and news decision making. It will help if you have some design or computer skills, or at least know some design concepts. But even if you don't have those skills, I can probably get you up to speed quickly if you have the desire and drive to learn design and to approach the Macintosh.

Try not to be too discouraged by want ads that ask for Quark skills. There are still plenty of newspapers out there - small to major - that don't require such skills. While it's great to find technically inclined copy editors, it's important to remember that this technology is merely a tool with which to practice our craft.

3. Experience.

Whether it's an internship, or a stint on your college paper, there is no substitute. I rarely look at grade point averages on resumes. I look for experience that's going to help that person make a smooth transition into the pressure-filled world of a major daily newspaper.

4. Creativity.

Your cover letter and your resume will tell a lot about you. If you have written to the human resources department, that makes me wonder how well you'll be able to use our research library to find information. After all, how hard is it to call the switchboard of a newspaper and ask them who is in charge of hiring copy editors?

If you are applying for a job with a focus on design, ditch the standard resume form and show me what kind of flair you have. If it's a standard copy editing job, make sure your cover letter says something other than that you would enjoy talking with me about opportunities at the Times. Show me in that letter what sort of person you would be for the newspaper. Show me some passion for what you're seeking.

Creativity - whether in headlines, cutlines, art ideas or design - is an extremely attractive trait in copy editors. Along those same lines, try to send your very best, most creative work. Don't just send clips. Make sure they are special clips.

5. Knowledge of the Times.

We are available at most major news stands. So it puzzles me when people apply and have no knowledge of our newspaper. It helps me as a basis for conversation if people understand that we are owned by the Poynter Institute, that we are industry leaders in zoning and local news, or that our color reproduction and design are some of the best in the newspaper world.

If you absolutely don't have any knowledge, ask me about all the things I have just described. If you don't ask these types of questions, I don't get a sense that you really want to work at the Times, you just want to work.

Yes, flattery and a show of interest will get you everywhere. But please, be sincere.

6. Convictions.

This is not a business for the wishy-washy. When you make a decision, you have to be able to defend it. So tell me how you feel about our news decisions, or the lead story that was in The New York Times that day, or the graphic photo that everyone ran of the bombing in Oklahoma City. Tell me about your newspaper's reputation in the community and whether that reputation is deserved. Talk to me about what you think a newspaper's role in the community should be. Tell me what you think a copy editor's role should be at a newspaper.

7. Flexibility and a sense of reality.

Not everyone can start at a major newspaper, or start as the 1A designer at a major newspaper. Use that entry -level position to find out how things work at your newspaper. Absorb as much knowledge as you can and be willing to work on just about anything your editors ask you to. The more you show your flexibility, the more valuable you become. You also show everyone that you can be trusted to do a variety of jobs.

8. Attention to detail.

I scan cover letters and resumes for style and grammar errors. If you have an error, it's a good bet you won't get hired. I know people get in a hurry, but first impressions are extremely important, so check, check and check again.

If you do send in clips, I'll be looking at headlines, cutlines, weird indents (I hope I don't run across too many), cropping, teases and just about anything else on the page that involves detail work. As the saying goes, "God is in the details," and so it is with journalism.

9. Curiosity.

Do you know what's going on in the world, in your community? Do you know about trends in the journalism world? Can you put things into historical context? If you work on a local desk, do you still read about the latest congressional actions? Do you know about the extensive use of public records in today's newsrooms?

Are you curious enough about design to investigate trends and advances in that area? In other words, do you have curiosity about things around you, or things that you know will help you in your career?

10. Common sense.

This is the tricky little trait that usually separates the leaders from the followers in the copy desk world. Common sense is having peripheral vision, so that you can make informed decisions. Common sense is being able to make decisions on the fly that are the right decisions. Common sense is having an intuitive sense that something needs to be done and then DOING IT.

One final thought: Anticipation and preparation are two things that can turn average copy editors into brilliant copy editors. Keep your ear to the ground, your eyes open and your brain busy thinking ahead, and you'll wow your fellow editors.

This information originated as a handout for a Poynter Institute seminar for journalism educators in June, 1995.